

CIVIL WAR STORIES



"THE BATTLE OF MARTIN'S CREEK"

BATTLE IN SHARP COUNTY "by Maude Shaver White "
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To travelers of state Highway 62-63 into the foothills of the Ozark mountains of northeast Arkansas, there exists a quiet, peaceful and quaint beauty that might have been thus for ages. The stillness of the pastoral scene appears never to have been more disturbed than by the grazing of cattle. Very few inhabitants of Sharp county are aware that the now rolling field that slants down into Martin creek, three miles east of Williford, was, during the Civil war, the site of a well-planned battle and the only battle fought in Sharp county. Here the Federals and Confederates met on February 8, 1864 to fight a battle of which little is recorded in history books.

A living eye-witness of this battle is Mrs. Helen Grove now 92, who as a child of 13, watched the fighting from the window of her home, which was situated on the hill over looking the field where the battle was fought.

On February 6, 1864, the Confederate army, under the command of Col. Thomas R. Freeman, was located in or near Smithville, Lawrence county, about 40 miles from Batesville. This was a suitable place of encampment while plans were being made for the next attack. To strengthen his force, Colonel Freeman decided to send four prisoners to Batesville to exchange for his own captured men. He carried out this order very successfully, and it is said that while making the exchange in Batesville he made the friendship of a Federal captain and upon departure each asked the other to visit him at the close of the war. This was agreed upon and Captain Wolf went on his way back to Smithville. All would have gone well had not Capt Wolf during his stay in Batesville strategically disclosed the headquarters of his remaining army.

As he was returning to his force, he was suddenly overtaken by the Federals in charge of Col. John Stephens, who was planning a severe attack on Wolf's army at Smithville. However, as previously planned in Wolf's absence, Maj. Vau Shaver had changed the Confederacy encampment and had marched his men, number about 100 to Martin's creek, on the old Baker farm, a distance of about 16 miles.

Colonel Stephens, arriving in Smithville and finding traces of the route the enemy had taken, followed in quick pursuit.

Following this pursuit of the Federals, the following is an excerpt from the report of Col. John W. Stephens of the Eleventh Missouri Cavalry.

"Captain: I have the honor to report that, in obedience to a special order issued from the headquarters, District. of Northeastern Arkansas, dated February 7,1864, I moved the same day with a detachment of the 11th Missouri Cavalry and 1st Nebraska Cavalry, consisting of four officers and 64 men of the 11th Missouri Cavalry and Capt. T. J. Majors, and 40 men of the 1st Nebraska Cavalry, together with eight men of the 4th Arkansas Infantry, to attack the camp of Colonel Freeman, then supposed to be encamped on the Smithville road, about 25 miles from this point. On my arrival at the point designated, I found that the camp had broken up, and that Colonel Freeman had moved with his command northwardly. I then, upon consultation with Captain Majors, determined to follow him and attack wherever I might find him. In accordance with this determination, I moved the command through Smithville to a point on Spring river westwardly to point known as Morgan's mill, near the mouth of Martin's creek. Finding that the men were fatigued and that my horses were not in condition to attack his camp that night, I halted the command and encamped.

"Early the next morning, the command took up its line of march up both sides of Spring river, the detachment of the 1st Nebraska Cavalry under Captain Majors, moving up the south side of the river to a point known as the farm of Widow Crawford. With the remaining portion of the command consisting of the 4th Arkansas Infantry and 11th Missouri Cavalry, I moved cautiously up the north side of the river, crossing at Marshall's Ford. Captain Majors was ordered, in case of attack either by me upon the enemy or any attack by them upon me, to cross the river at nearest point and effect a junction as rapidly as possible. About seven miles from the point at which I started, I encountered the enemy." When Captain Wolf with his prisoners overtook Colonel Freeman's outfit, the battle was in full progress. As, Wolf went in fast pursuit of a Federal who was getting away, he recognized it to be the captain he had encountered in Batesville. This made Wolf more determined to make his capture. Finally the Federal's horse slipped, pinning the rider underneath and Wolf dismounted and spoke to his prisoner:

"Well, captain, I asked you to visit me, but I didn't look for you so soon." At the end of the battle, casualties for the Federals were 35 killed, wounded and captured. The Confederates didn't lose a man. Strategic planning had made it almost a massacre. What was left of the Federal forces crossed at the Walker Ford and went back to headquarters at Batesville. The Confederates kept this encampment for some time.

Although almost 80 years have passed, Mrs. Groves remembers very vividly watching the battle from the window of her home. With a spirit of enthusiasm which was not broken by the hardships she endured in the Civil War days, Mrs. Groves recalls the battle in this manner.

"It was early morning when we first saw the smoke and heard the reports of the guns. The battle must have started on the hill by Aunt Harret Baker's house. I wasn't frightened because we weren't taught to be afraid in those days. We could see the blue and gray uniforms of the soldiers on their horses. Finally when the firing

ceased, my father, with Joe Boyd, went down to the battlefield to see if there were any injured left behind. They had left one Federal dead and one wounded. Father brought them home, and buried the Federal in a blanket. The wounded one they took to a Dr. Mattix's home when nightfall came. You see, we were Union sympathizers and my two brothers were in the Union army. For four weeks we furnished meat, butter and eggs for the injured soldier. When he was about to travel again my father took him part of the way on one of our horses to join his troops at Batesville. Later he sent word back that he made it all right. One night three men rode up to our house and demanded of father what he had done with the dead Federal's body. Father answered that because he did not have lumber to build a casket, he'd buried him in a blanket in the Groves' cemetery, close by our house ."

Mrs. Groves was the daughter of Dr. Garner and the youngest of 10 children. Her father being ill most of the time and her two brothers in the Union army, much of the work fell upon Mrs. Groves and a sister. She remembers very distinctly the hardships they endured during the war. She did the carding and spinning for the wearing apparel for the entire family. With her sister, Mrs. Garner also cut down the trees and dragged them home behind a wagon and oxen to be split into fire wood. They also planted and harvested 12 acres of cotton and eight of corn. Mrs. Grove, whose husband has long since been dead, makes her home with a son, Dave Groves of Ravenden. She is very active and likes nothing better than to help with the house-work. When asked her ideas about the present war, Mrs. Groves answered, "I don't keep up very much with the present day situation. I suppose I like to live too much in the past, in the time when I was a girl and Civil war was fought. This is the third war I've lived through and I know what it's like. I saw one battle with my own eyes, the Battle of Martin's Creek".

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